feature article   *david a. snow and leon anderson*

street people

Street people, long visible in the Third World, are once again a conspicuous and disturbing feature of most First World cities. Studies of street life and the homeless help explain why these people have become more visible, why they are often seen as menacing and what the future holds for them.

Passersby may look askance at those who use a sidewalk to work, play, eat or sleep. Downtown, San Francisco, California.

Standing in the median of a busy street in a major city, a man in torn clothes peddles the afternoon newspaper to drivers as they roll to a stop at the intersection. It is late on a weekday afternoon and the streets are beginning to fill as rush hour approaches. Employees from nearby businesses scurry through a small park on the way to their cars and bus stops. A disheveled man holding an old McDonald's coffee cup has staked out his favorite spot to hustle spare change from the early evening crowd. Four elderly residents of a nearby cut-rate hotel sit on a park bench chatting. Down the block, behind tables of used books and magazines, men haggle over prices with browsing pedestrians. Across the street, under a drugstore awning, a man strums a guitar slung with a piece of rope around his shoulder. Beside him a sign reads, "Songs on Request. Donations Accepted." Meanwhile, on a terraced ledge, several teenage boys with skateboards practice their moves to the pulsing rap strains of Puff Daddy.

These assorted characters, often called "street people," are presumed to share something that separates them from others using the same public spaces. In the past two decades, the number of street people has risen dramatically in the United States and other affluent nations, but of the various street people, it is particularly the homeless who spark public concern and generate a sense of unease among citizens. Passersby may wonder what new developments have forced these people out into the streets. But street people are an old feature of world cities now reappearing after years of diminished numbers and visibility. They are reappearing because of changes in the economy, the availability of low-income housing, the welfare system and the physical transformation of cities.

> Street people have been a feature of city life dating back to Biblical times. In preindustrial cities, where activities associated with home, work, and leisure were not as neatly separated as in modern cities, the streets were routinely swarming with people. Even there, however, some marginal people—by virtue of their distinct activities—occasioned such vilifying tracts as Martin Luther's *The Book of Beggars*.

who are street people?

Most people use sidewalks for specific purposes: to get from one place to another, for exercise, window-shopping or a leisurely stroll. Street people, however, use the same spaces for eking out a living and conducting their daily lives. Thus, the boundaries between public and private are blurred, prompting those of us who use these spaces for more conventional purposes to distinguish ourselves from street people. Street people engage in at least three types of "out-of-place" public activities: economic, social and residential.

Their economic activities include quasi-legal and illegal ways to make money such as: hawking newspapers, reselling books and magazines, scavenging and peddling junk and cans, washing windows at stop lights or during traffic jams, panhandling and selling drugs and sex. These activities constitute "shadow work"—work performed outside of the regular world of employment that still depends on standard business enterprise and the commercial traffic associated with it, such as panhandling at a busy intersection or near an ATM machine. Street peoples' social activities include hanging out and conversing on street corners, in building alcoves and on park benches. Their residential activities include appropriating sidewalks, alcoves, alleys, or parks as places to sleep and store personal belongings.

While some street people engage in only one of these activities, many pursue a couple of them, while others, such as many of the homeless, may engage in all three. Mitchell Duneier observed these differences in his study of 25 poor black men who worked or lived on the sidewalks of Sixth Avenue in New York's Greenwich Village. Duneier's main informant, Hakim, made his living by selling books on the sidewalk, but rented a small apartment in New Jersey. Most of his

street associates—who lived by selling magazines, watching the vendors' tables or panhandling—either slept on the streets, doubled-up with relatives or friends or alternated between such irregular arrangements. But no matter how they scraped by or where they slept, the Greenwich Village sidewalk was the center of their social life. It is this unconventional use of the streets for working, sleeping, and leisure, combined with their frequently impoverished or disheveled appearance, that makes street people seem like menacing intruders claiming public space.

the "problem" of street people in first world cities

Street people have been a feature of city life dating back to Biblical times. In preindustrial cities, where activities associated with home, work, and leisure were not as neatly separated as in modern cities, the streets were routinely swarming with people. Even there, however, some marginal people—by virtue of their distinct activities—occasioned such vilifying tracts as Martin Luther's *The Book of Beggars*.. The social dislocation caused by industrialization and the breakdown of European agrarian economies increased the numbers of such suspect folks, who were targeted by "vagrancy statutes" to control or eliminate them, particularly in England and its colonies.

Photo by Laurie Hoffinger

Sidewalk workplace for a homeless craftsperson, Berkeley, California.

In time, the problem of vagrancy and street people seemed to disappear in affluent nations, except after major shocks such as wars or economic depressions. The homeless seemed to vanish in part due to economic growth and to welfare systems designed to assist those who could not fit into the industrial economy. At the same time, as Lyn Lofland has described, modern societies changed the way in which they imposed order in cities. Instead of an older "appearential order," in

which citizens recognized and handled each other by reading signs of clothing and appearance, the new system employed a "spatial order"—geographic segregation that designated what kinds of people should be found in one place rather than another. These changes did not eliminate street people, but confined them to marginal areas of the city—variously known as "Hobohemia" in Chicago, "Skid Row" in Seattle, the "Tenderloin" in San Francisco and the "Bowery" in New York. Thus, homeless people's visibility and their interaction with other, more mainstream citizens was minimized.

Photo by Laurie Hoffinger

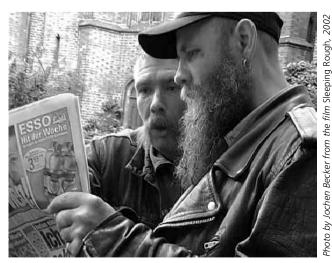**Sidewalk salesman, Berkeley, California.**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the heady, optimistic days of American urban planning, some planners and sociologists predicted that the marginal residents of skid rows would disappear entirely as urban renewal revived their haunts. However, about a decade later, the numbers of street people started growing—and continued to grow through the last two decades of the 20th century, not only in U.S. cities but in other major First World cities as well, such as London, Paris, Berlin and Tokyo.

The homeless street people of the 1980s and 1990s were much more visible than the skid row residents had been, not only because of their increasing numbers, but also because the urban landscape had changed. Beginning in the 1970s in cities throughout the United States, many neighborhoods that housed and provided services for marginal populations became targets for commercial development and financial speculation. From New York's Bowery to Anchorage's Fourth Avenue, developers turned space, once ceded to marginal people, to new uses for business and more affluent people. Urban redevelopment and gentrification thus pushed increasing numbers of homeless street people into prime spaces for both living and leisure.

City residents have become increasingly uneasy and intolerant of this new presence. Local governments have tried to reestablish a sense of spatial order and security for more affluent residents—forbidding the presence, panhandling, loitering, and movement of homeless street people, particularly in high-visibility spaces. New York City, for instance, has tried to "clean up" Grand Central Station and Washington Square, and has set up shelters and other services for the homeless far from such prime urban space. In the first half of the 1990s, Gwendolyn Dordick studied four groups of homeless street people in four different settings in New York City: a bus station, a public shelter, a makeshift shantytown and a private shelter. By the mid-1990s, the large number of street people she observed at Penn Station had been dramatically reduced, while the large men's shelter on the northern tip of Manhattan, far away from the city's prime locations, continued to thrive.

> These changes did not eliminate street people, but confined them to marginal areas of the city—variously known as "Hobohemia" in Chicago, "Skid Row" in Seattle, the "Tenderloin" in San Francisco and the "Bowery" in New York. Thus, homeless people's visibility and their interaction with other, more mainstream citizens was minimized.

Such strategies for segregating destitute street people have a long history in Western societies, harking back at least to what social historians refer to as the era of the Great Confinement (1660 to the end of the 19th century) in which authorities made massive efforts to segregate unemployed vagrants, criminals, orphans and the mentally ill into workhouses. More recently, some cities, such as Las Vegas and Los Angeles, have ceded control of a portion of formerly public downtown space to private interests that strive to ward off undesirables with strategies ranging from erecting architectural barriers to hiring security guards. In some areas, such as the section of Greenwich Village Duneier studied, street people and other citizens have evolved a kind of working accommodation, with both groups contributing to a vibrant street life. But this is more the exception than the rule in American cities. And even where such an order does exist, it is often fragile and subject to recurrent ruptures when street peoples'

Homeless friends share a newspaper, Hamburg, Germany.

interactions with business owners and passersby violate expectations for proper social interaction in public space—as when some of the men Duneier studied made lewd comments to passing women.

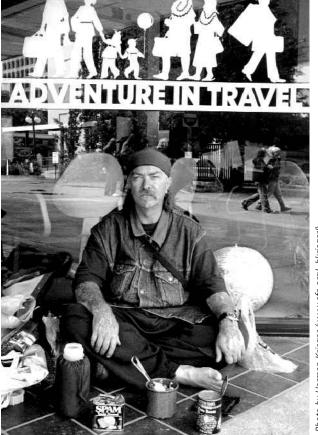## why have street people [re]appeared?

What else accounts for the apparent growth in the population of street people in American cities, as well as in other major cities in the First World, during the last 20 years? The dearth of affordable low-income housing provides a partial answer. So does the redevelopment of marginal spaces, such as old skid rows. But a shortfall in affordable housing and spatial dislocation explain only part of why the number of street people has increased.

> Deindustrialization and economic globalization weakened the demand for unskilled workers throughout much of the developed world. Some of those unable to compete in the new labor markets have turned to making a living on the street.

Deindustrialization and economic globalization weakened the demand for unskilled workers throughout much of the developed world. Some of those unable to compete in the new labor markets have turned to making a living on the street. Many of the homeless we observed bartering and panhandling

on the streets of Austin, Texas had originally traveled to Austin in hopes of finding employment in the city's construction boom of the mid-1980s. They pursued jobs through the state employment agency, but with little long-term success. Some then sought work in fast food restaurants, but often were not hired because they lacked a stable address and local work experience. Boxed out of the traditional labor market, many homeless individuals turned to shadow work such as panhandling and collecting aluminum cans from garbage dumpsters, at first as a stopgap measure. As other opportunities failed to materialize, shadow work became their most stable source of income.

Also contributing to the increase of street people is the dramatic change in state welfare policies over the past 25 years throughout the developed world. This change, which ended what Gøsta Esping-Andersen dubbed the golden age of welfare states, has progressively reduced and weakened the safety net. For many, survival has become contingent on cobbling together alternative means of subsistence, including street-level shadow work.

A sidewalk residence, Eugene, Oregon.

A homeless woman tidies her sidewalk home, San Francisco, California.

In addition, many institutions that used to accommodate the poor, the disabled, and the displaced have weakened or disappeared—cheap residential hotels, single residence occupancy (SRO) housing, workhouses, mental institutions, and neighborhoods such as skid row districts that historically sheltered and served "undesirables." Today much of the SRO stock is gone, as are nearly all of the large mental asylums that were open in the 1950s and early 1960s. The number of shelter beds has grown since the 1980s, but in most cities rarely in sufficient numbers to keep up with the homeless population. And even when shelter space is available many homeless people avoid it, fearing for their safety and resisting the typically demeaning regimentation of shelter life.

Yet another contribution to the growth and the variety of street people is the spread of a youth street culture that embraces hanging out in vibrant public spaces. Often, those hanging out are a mixture of local adolescents with homes and homeless youth, many of whom are transient. Because they idle about, hustle for money, and take over public places for their own amusement, adults often regard them as threatening and speak of them in derogatory terms, as in the case of the "gutter punks" who congregate in a trendy, night life area in Tucson, Arizona.

Our conversations with these youth, as well as with some homeless adults, suggest that many choose to be on the streets rather than being forced to avail themselves of institutional alternatives. Certainly the prospect of action and bright lights, opportunities to hustle, the availability of recreational drugs and freedom from parents and others can make the streets particularly alluring.

But it is difficult to assess the extent of their choice without understanding the options they have and the contexts in which their choices are made. Lacking the money to enter even the low-income housing market, having limited education, few job skills, a dearth of social support off the streets, and in many cases problems with alcohol or drugs, street people often have few real attractive choices. Living with family or friends may not be an option, or may be one that entails conflict, abuse or a loss of dignity. Fear of physical harm and a lack of freedom frequently make homeless shelters a frightening prospect as well. Thus, to presume that being on the streets is

Urban renewal projects typically increase upscale housing and decrease the availability of low-income lodging, San Francisco, California.

largely a matter of choice is to ignore the unattractive options that confront most people who end up on the streets or who cycle on and off them as many do.

These factors which are increasing the population and visibility of homeless people in the United States, combined with others such as influxes of refugees, are at work on the streets of major cities in other countries as well.

the future of street people

Is the increased number and visibility of street people during the past two decades a historical anomaly, or are street people becoming a permanent feature of the street scene throughout the First World's big cities? The latter is more likely unless there are significant changes in the mismatch between labor markets and people's skills, the withering of the welfare state and the institutions serving the needs of street people, the reconfiguration of urban space resulting from gentrification and the pressure of market forces and refugee and immigration flows into some cities. In other words, unless there are significant changes in the conjunction of conditions that generated the increasing number and visibility of street people, there is little reason to suspect that they will suddenly disappear.

There is an alternative scenario, however: the number of homeless street people may remain the same, or even increase, but become much less visible because of still more vigilant efforts by officials to push them away from high-visibility areas. Short of such drastic exclusionary strategies, or a decrease in the number of street people, middle and upper-class urbanites will continue to see them as a festering social problem, leading to occasional conflicts and new tactics for controlling them, such as building more antiseptic "pseudo-public environments" like theme parks and malls. But such planning innovations aimed at spatial segregation and "pest control" will likely meet only minimal success. For if anything

is certain about street people, it is that they are remarkably creative in their appropriation and use of public space. Thus, the urban street scene will inevitably involve a dance between street people and their advocates and those who favor policies to limit and exclude them. ■

recommended resources

Burt, Martha R., and Laudan Y. Aron. *Helping America's Homeless*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2001. Analysis of the demographics and causes of homelessness, and of what has been and what should be done.

Duneier, Mitchell. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999. Portrait of poor black men who make their livelihood on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village by reselling books and magazines and by panhandling.

Dordick, Gwendolyn A. *Something Left to Lose: Personal Relations and Survival Among New York's Homeless*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997. An ethnographic study of four groups of homeless people in four different habitats in New York City.

Hagan, John, and Bill McCarthy. *Mean Streets: Youth Crime and Homelessness*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Describes homeless youth and their activities in Toronto and Vancouver.

Hopper, Kim, and Jim Baumohl. "Held in Abeyance: Rethinking Homelessness and Advocacy." *American Behavioral Scientist* 37 (1994): 522-552. Recasts homelessness as a breakdown of a country's ability to house its surplus populations.

Lofland, Lyn H. *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. Outlines the practices and conventions historically used to create social and psychological order in cities.

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. *Out of Sight–Out of Mind? A Report on Anti-Homeless Laws, Litigation and Alternatives in 50 United States Cities*. Washington, D.C.: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1999. An overview of anti-homeless initiatives across major U.S. cities.

Snow, David A., and Leon Anderson. *Down on Their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. A case study of street life and the survival strategies of homeless people in Austin, Texas in the mid-1980s.

Wright, Talmadge. *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997. Homeless movements fight against redevelopment in Chicago and San Jose.

Photo by Cindy Lee

The diversity of urban street life, San Francisco, California.